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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MONROVIA 000617

SIPDIS

PASS TO AF/W FOR PDAVIS, JBUELOW, PCARTER, INR/AA FOR BGRAVES, PRM
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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: SIGNS OF HOPE IN LOFA COUNTY

11. SUMMARY. On a three-day trip through Lofa County, May 16-18 Poloff and UK representative visited International Rescue Committee (IRC) projects funded by the USG and the UK Department for International Development (DFID). After visiting numerous communities, villages, and towns, it became clear that the residents of Lofa are committed to rebuilding their lives. Citizens have returned to farming, are resolving disputes peacefully, and are building schools for their children. The County Superintendent is engaged in county development and is open to outside assistance. Liberian refugees from Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Ivory Coast are returning at the rate of 200-300 per week, often with the assistance of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). END SUMMARY.

12. Lofa, like every other county in Liberia, was heavily affected by the war and people fled in large numbers across neighboring borders. With refugee camps closing in June, people from Lofa are returning in large numbers. Poloff traveled to remote communities in Lofa County May 16-18 to visit USG and UK government-funded projects. In conversations with residents and UN representatives, it became clear that many of those who have already returned or many who are returning, are originally from Lofa County and they are returning to their previous villages and communities. Lofa was formerly the breadbasket of Liberia, producing rice and other staple crops to help feed the rest of the country. Liberian refugees from other countries are returning back to farming as a means of livelihood. Driving through the county, Poloff observed a number of fields being cleared of trees and brush to make space for farms.

13. The IRC is implementing a multi-year, Department of Labor (DOL)-sponsored project to combat the worst forms of child labor. Poloff visited skills training programs in woodwork, soap making, tie die, and sewing. Boys and girls who enter skills training programs are allowed to choose from a list of skills; most girls chose tie die, soap making, and sewing and most boys choose woodwork or auto mechanics. Poloff observed that many of the girls involved in the skills training program were teen mothers. Both boys and girls indicated that they wanted to attend school once they finished the training programs. The training programs will hopefully give them skills to support themselves. The World Food Programme (WFP) food incentive program for female children is working. Poloff noticed that more than one school had more female students than male students because WFP gives girls extra food to take home if they attend school.

14. DFID is funding community development projects through IRC. Each of the 72 communities sponsored forms a community development council (CDC) to decide which projects to implement. Poloff found that many of the communities decided to build community centers or town halls. Other building projects included latrines and clinics. The IRC hopes that once the projects are completed the CDCs will continue to function as a local decision making mechanism. Many communities are also pooling their own resources to build community schools.

¶5. The Superintendent of Lofa County, Glalkpai Kortimai, appears engaged in the reconstruction and development of the county. He told Poloff that he has already spoken to various investors and is looking at ways to revitalize the farming industry and to introduce cash crops for export. He plans to form farming cooperatives within the county's districts to manage the 1,000 acres that the central government has given each county for crop development. He also indicated a desire to establish microcredit or microfinance programs in Lofa. He said the Chinese will fix the state-owned radio station repeater so that Lofa will have access to information even after the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) leaves. He commented that the World Bank road project, which is employing many former combatants, was a welcome job creation program to keep young men off the streets and out of trouble.

¶6. Lofa is not without its problems. Land tenure issues are problematic and the Superintendent has put a temporary halt to all sale of public land. Until recently, the sale of private land was also halted so that mechanisms could be put in place. The plight of women is slow to improve. Poloff observed that women do much of the farming and household work and women continue to be exploited, notwithstanding IRC women's groups who are teaching women about their rights. The Superintendent complained that international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are driving up commodity prices in Voinjama, the county seat, and he was planning to impose price ceilings. Child labor continues to exist, but mostly in the form of field labor. In a largely farming society, children are not exempt from labor during the planting season. One community admitted that they send their children to work in the teacher's field because the teacher is not paid.

¶7. Comment. Villages in Lofa are largely homogenous ethnic populations, making dispute resolution and community decision making easier. The tensions that may exist between Mandingos and other

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ethnic groups in Lofa are not as pronounced as they are in other counties in Liberia. Most people are not waiting for development assistance, but are building houses and schools and planting rice or other crops to sustain themselves. Child labor persists, but the IRC DOL-sponsored project is meeting its objectives to give children and families alternatives. The IRC enrollment counselors are effective at convincing families about the importance of education over work. The strong spirit of the residents of Lofa to rebuild their community is a positive force in the recovery of the county.
End Summary.